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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the Traveling Grannies and Grandpas Program (TGGP), an innovative program that partners children in need with a caring older adult. Since the founding of the initial program, which provided pregnant and parenting teens with mentors, the TGPP has expanded to include a school-based mentoring program. The program believes that the group of elder volunteers could have a positive effect in the face of an alarming increase in school-based problems, including substance abuse, violence and behavior issues, along with increased class sizes and more children with learning difficulties. Thoughts on the program from both mentors and the children and teens they help are included. (GCP)

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by

Kathleen Piggins

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Helping Across Generations

by Kathleen Piggins

When Damon, 8, couldn't read or write and created problems in his second grade class, his teacher could not give him the one-on-one attention he needed. Damon's disruptions also made the task of teaching a class of 31 students difficult. Fortunately, Damon's teacher knew just what he needed to succeed: a "Grandpa" named James Palmer.

Palmer, 71, is a volunteer in an innovative program that partners children in need with a caring older adult. Traveling Grannies & Grandpas (TGGP) was started in 1992 by Peggy Lawrence Burns in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Damon was initially reluctant to go to Palmer, but after a few weeks he became anxious for the daily interaction. Slowly, he began reading and his behavior improved in the classroom as well. He told Palmer that he didn't feel "different" anymore and was enjoying school.

Seeing the need

Grand Rapids is a medium-sized city where the percentage of children in poverty—13.4 percent—is below the national average of 18 percent. But Burns saw a gap in the city's community services when it came to helping pregnant and parenting teens.

Burns was responding to an alarming rise in teen pregnancies. She believed that these children having children needed help from their elders with the

difficult job of raising confident youngsters who would be ready to learn when they reached school age.

At the time, Burns was the director of the Foster Grandparents program, a national service program that trained and placed low-income older adults in classrooms, to act as classroom aides.The volunteers received a small, non-taxable stipend of $2.10 an hour.

Burns envisioned a similar model that would provide pregnant and parenting teens with mentors. With assistance from the Foster Grandparents Program, Gerontology Network (a non-profit organization in Grand Rapids that assists older adults), and other community organizations TGGP was launched with two volunteers and twice as many teens.

After years of growth in the program, a decline in teen pregnancy rates has reduced the need for volunteers in this area, and now there are just two volunteers working with pregnant and parenting teens. The volunteers visit the teens in their homes at least once each week and also assist at a Grand Rapids high school for pregnant teens. Often they help the teens with their errands, and while doing so, find opportunities to develop trusting relationships. Each volunteer commits to 20 hours per week and works with anywhere from two to fifteen teen moms.

Branching out

In 1999, the program expanded to include a school-based mentoring program. Burns felt that her corps of wise elders could have a positive effect in the face of an alarming increase in school-based problems, including substance abuse, violence and behavior issues, along with increased class sizes and more children with learning difficulties. There are now 26 mentors working with about 350 schoolchildren.

Damon's friend Palmer is one of them. He serves in a school helping with the

three "R's", revised: reading, writing and the right way to act.

"Kids need emotional support they aren't getting at home," said Palmer. "The behavior is bad and the teachers can hardly do anything. The kids want to interrupt the class to get attention. I don't think most kids today feel special or loved. I tell them they are loved and they smile that just lights up their face." He has helped many children with the basics, acting as tutor to bring students up to grade-level in certain subjects or helping students learn appropriate behaviors

"She shows me a better way"

"I have seen the biggest change in kids," Burns said. "The teen moms are not having repeated pregnancies and are becoming better parents than before the Traveling Grannies & Grandpas. I see the program preventing further abuse—of the teen moms who learn to respect themselves and of their children who benefit from having the loving presence of a Grandma."

Lydia Lee, 73, started with the program in 1992. She believes that the single biggest influence she has in the teen moms' lives is that she listens, without judgment. She often reminds other adults of how different it is to be a teen today than when she was young. Different because of the greater prevalence of drugs, violence and sex—temptations and dangers that Grandma Lydia believes only amplify the generation gap.

One of Lee's 'girls' is Ashley Graham. Ashley says that Lee supports her in her plan to go on to college (she is currently a senior at Park High School in Grand Rapids) to study to become a nurse.

Perhaps even more important—"Grandma Lydia has helped me to be a better mom," Ashley said. "She shows me a better way to handle my daughter when I get mad. She listens to me and gives extra good advice. She just makes sense."

Life lessons

"No one told them how to take care of themselves, or their babies," says Lee. She believes that a lack of self-esteem and good adult role models are reasons for teens getting pregnant; their self image is poor and few of these teens have positive adult feedback.

Lee encourages the teens she works with to achieve in school and to raise their expectations—and many of the teens she has mentored mention Lee as the reason they went on to college, graduated from high school or pursued a career. She keeps in touch with most of the moms, and was recently invited to the wedding of one of her former 'girls'.

Ashley credits Lee with teaching her to manage money (to save for a car), her shopping savvy (finding bargains), and her ability to take care of herself. And when Ashley was tired and yelling at her daughter, Lee helped her to understand age-appropriate behavior and told her about better ways to discipline than spanking or yelling.

TGGP in the schools

Yolanda Venezuela, principal at Jefferson Elementary, welcomes the program volunteers in her school.

"They set a positive, relaxed and homey atmosphere. There is a different type of respect for grandparents. They are another role model for the children, seniors giving to the community and giving the children one-on-one attention," says Venezuela.

Palmer says the children he mentors welcome the additional caring connection with an adult. "Sometimes the mothers and fathers don't have the education so kids don't do homework because there is no one to help them," Palmer said.

The volunteers receive extensive training in issues of child abuse and neglect, and the program has an established system for reporting abuse. Palmer has had the experience of working with a child who became comfortable enough with him to disclose sexual abuse at home. He listened and, following program guidelines, told the child that she would be safe. He reported her allegations to his supervisor, who contacted child protective services. While Palmer is not sure where the child is now, he is sure that she is in a safer place because she felt secure enough with him to tell him of the abuse.

Yet he believes he makes the biggest difference in the lives of the children simply by listening and conveying to the children that they are somebody. With this simple message of self worth, he believes he can boost their self-image and their ability to form positive relationships with peers and adults.

"I got involved in TGGP after I retired, and I wanted to work with kids," Palmer explained. "I have always liked kids, they are important. As much as I have helped them, though, they have helped me."

Traveling Grannies & Grandpas facts

- 2,418 Children have been served since 1992
- 323 children were served in the 2001-2002 school year
- there are currently 28 volunteers; each volunteer is required to serve 20 hours per week, and must meet minimum training requirements

TGGP volunteers work with children in 20 schools during school hours. In many of the schools there is a room just for the TGGP volunteers referred to as the Grannies/Grandpas room. A few of the volunteers also work with after-school programs. All volunteers agree to 20 hours per week and ongoing training is provided by the program.

A national model?

In Grand Rapids, community organizations praise TGGP for helping stem

abuse and continually refer teens to the program as a model of parenting education. The Carl's Foundation in Detroit, The Grand Rapids Community Foundation and the State of Michigan contribute funds to support TGGP, which has an annual budget of $146,000, to support 28 volunteers working with 323 teens and children in the 2001-2002 school year. The volunteer's stipend of $2.10 per hour is part of the cost, in addition to transportation reimbursement for the volunteers.

Burns believes it is time for the program to go national. "It (TGGP) has made such a difference here in Kent County, it can make the same differences in the lives of children anywhere," Burns asserted. "The partnership of children with older adults, that care, is powerful."

With the help of a grant from longtime supporter The Carl's Foundation, Burns has prepared the materials for replication in any community. In the spring of 2002, the program was replicated in the Detroit area by Catholic Social Services and has begun serving children in that city.

"To start TGGP just give me a call or e-mail me," Burns urged. She can be reached at pburns@michiganseniors.org.

Kathleen Piggins is a Michigan writer who focuses primarily on parenting, child development and community issues.

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